

Fascism in Germany

Immediately following World War I, a revolt occurred that left Germany in a mess. But because of the large number of Germans favored democracy and this was the beginning of the Weimar Republic.

The Weimar Republic was in trouble from its inception. With the unsteady government many new political parties began to form. Corporal Adolf Hitler was ordered in September 1919 to investigate a small group in Munich known as the German Workers' Party. In 1920 the party was renamed the Nationalist Socialist German Workers' Party, or the Nazis. Hitler joined the party and would slowly rise to the head of the party.

In 1923 things became bad in Germany. They could no longer pay reparations to the Allied countries. On 8th November, 1923, the Bavarian government held a meeting with about 3,000 officials. Adolf Hitler and armed storm troopers entered the building. Hitler jumped onto a table, fired two shots in the air and told the audience that the Munich Putsch or (Beer Hall Putsch) was taking place and the National Revolution had begun. It was a failed attempt and Hitler was sent to prison, however it was in prison that Hitler's true voice would be heard and published in his book *Mein Kampf* or My Struggle. This book would be the key to his success after prison.

1. How did Hitler become a member of the Nazi Party?
2. What was *Mein Kampf*?

The Nazi Party

By May of 1926, Hitler was released and had defeated any rivals within the Nazi Party and assumed the title of supreme leader (Führer). From the years 1926-1929, the Nazi Party was relatively small and quiet. On October 29, 1929, the Wall Street stock market crashed with disastrous worldwide effects. The whole world suffered, companies bankrupted, banks failed and people lost their life savings. Unemployment soared; poverty and starvation became real for everyone. Governments seemed powerless to help. Adolf Hitler knew his time had come.

Hitler had a large support base with the peasants and workers. He used the uncertainty of the government to gain more power by claiming he could do it better. By the 1930 Reichstag (legislative house) election the Nazi's were beginning to gain substantial support. The election gave them 107 seats in the Reichstag, which made them Germany's second largest party. In 1932 Hitler decided to challenge Paul von Hindenburg the current president, for his seat. Hitler was defeated. But two years later, Hitler used Germany's suffering to his advantage. Hitler became chancellor in 1933, and concentrated power to the Nazi Party. The German leaders seriously underestimated Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party.

1. How did the Wall Street crash help Hitler rise to power?

An old comrade of Hitler's sent a telegram to President Hindenburg regarding his new chancellor. Former General Erich Ludendorff had once supported Hitler and had even participated in the failed Beer Hall Putsch in 1923.

"By appointing Hitler Chancellor of the Reich you have handed over our sacred German Fatherland to one of the greatest demagogues of all time. I prophesy to you this evil man will plunge our Reich into the abyss and will inflict immeasurable woe on our nation. Future generations will curse you in your grave for this action." - General Erich Ludendorff

Adolf Hitler Becomes Dictator

Adolf Hitler, the new Chancellor of Germany, used the rules of democracy to legally establish himself as dictator. Hitler's plan was to establish a majority of elected Nazis in the Reichstag which would become a rubber stamp, passing whatever laws he desired while making it all perfectly legal.

The burning down of the Reichstag happened on February 27, 1933. The Reichstag Fire was blamed on the Communists, and Hitler used this event to obtain Hindenburg's signature to suspend a number of constitutional civil liberties. This would allow the Nazi government to take swift and harsh action against the communists. On his first day as chancellor, Hitler manipulated Hindenburg into dissolving the Reichstag and calling for the new elections.

After the new elections, the Nazis began a systematic takeover of the state governments throughout Germany. Armed SA and SS thugs barged into local government offices to throw out legitimate office holders and replace them with Nazi Reich commissioners. Hitler proposed the Enabling Act, which gave him dictatorial powers for four years. With his new powers Adolf Hitler becomes dictator of Germany in March 1933.

1. How did the Reichstag fire help Hitler?
2. What was the Enabling Act?

The Consolidation of Nazi Power

This was the birth of the Third Reich in German history. When Hindenburg died in 1934, Hitler had abolished the Presidential Office and merged it with his own to become the official Chancellor of Germany.

In May 1933, the Nazis ordered the abolition of the independent labor unions. Both strikes and lockouts were forbidden. Later during the spring of 1933, the Nazis banned all other political parties making the Nazi Party the only legal party. Hitler put big business under government control. The government had also outlawed freedom of the press and held a massive book burning. The Germans burned all books with "UnGerman" ideas. Some writers were Einstein, Freud, Hemingway, and Karl Marx. The formation of the Gestapo (secret state police) hunted down enemies and opponents of the government. Some were jailed and shot on suspicion alone. 1933 also saw the birth of the first concentration camps for enemies of the state.

Hitler had a plan to rebuild Germany. To deal with the Depression Hitler launched large public works including the construction of superhighways (autobahns), and established a labor service to provide jobs. He also built houses and replanted forests.

Hitler also focused on rearming Germany, in violation of the Versailles Treaty. The need for hardware stimulated the economy and started to end unemployment. Because of this Germany was the first country to rise up from the depression.

1. What did Hitler do to rebuild Germany?

2. How did Hitler violate the Versailles Treaty?

The Night of Long Knives

By 1934 Adolf Hitler appeared to have complete control over Germany, but he constantly feared that others wanted his power. To protect himself, Hitler used the tactic of divide and rule and encouraged other leaders such as Goering, Goebbels, Himmler and Rohm to compete with each other for senior positions.

Rohm was particularly hated because as leader of the Sturm Abteilung (SA) he had tremendous power and had the potential to remove any one of his competitors. Hitler was aware that Rohm and the SA had the power to remove him and decided to stop it.

In June 1934, Hitler, accompanied by the SS, arrived at Wiesse, where he arrested Rohm. During the next 24 hours 200 senior SA officers were arrested, however many were murdered. Fearing Rohm's strength, he was also shot by SS soldiers.

Hitler called the purge of the SA the Night of the Long Knives. In his speech Hitler explained why he had not relied on the courts to deal with the conspirators:

"In this hour I was responsible for the fate of the German people, and thereby I become the supreme judge of the German people. I gave the order to shoot the ringleaders in this treason."

The Night of the Long Knives was a turning point in the history of Hitler's Germany. Hitler had made it clear that he was the supreme ruler of Germany who had the right to be judge and jury, and had the power to decide whether people lived or died.

1. What was the purpose of the Night of Long Knives?
2. Why was this event a turning point in German History?